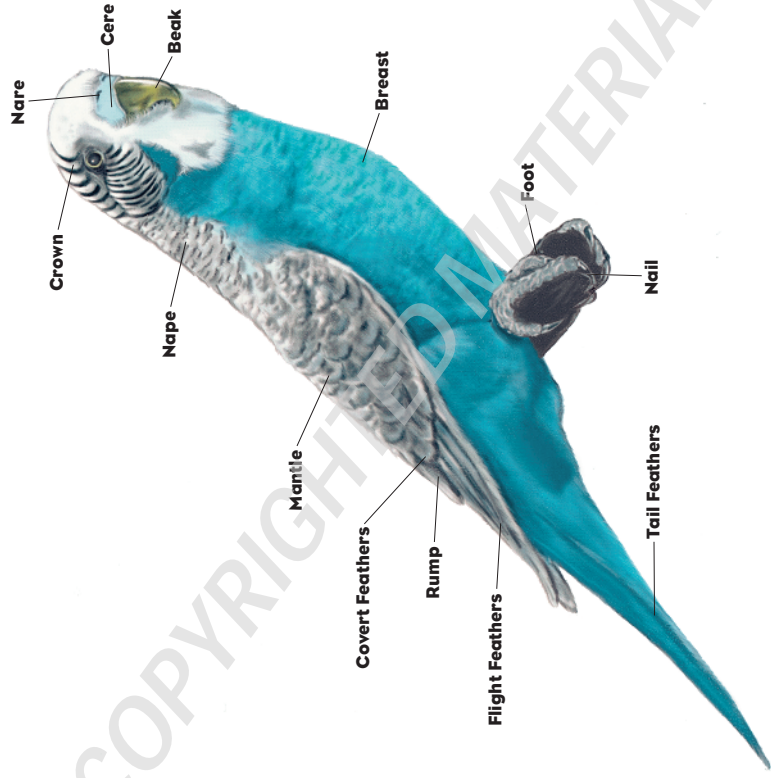


The Parakeet





Chapter 1

What Is a Parakeet?

Welcome to the wonderful world of parakeets! For many people, parakeets are their introduction to the fascinating hobby of birdkeeping. Some people move on to larger parrots after they become comfortable with caring for a parakeet, while others specialize in raising parakeets in pairs or small flocks.

The parakeet I had as a child, Charlie, was my first pet, and what I learned while keeping him led me to also adopt dogs, cats, a guinea pig, and the occasional tank of fish while I was growing up. After I graduated college and began working at the company that publishes *Bird Talk* magazine, an opportunity presented itself for me to adopt an African grey parrot named Sindbad who had special needs. The birdkeeping skills I learned while caring for Charlie helped me greatly in caring for Sindbad, and I appreciated each bird for the special individual he or she was.

This book will help you set up a healthy and interesting home for your parakeet. It will guide you in selecting a healthy bird and offer advice on feeding and grooming your pet. It will explain the importance of regular veterinary care and look at some common parakeet health problems. Finally, it will look at normal parakeet behaviors and offer some advice about how to teach your parakeet to do tricks.

If you feel the urge to become a bird owner and you've bought this book instead, you're on the right road. If you bought this book along with your parakeet, this is also a good first step. If you've picked up this book after having your bird a few weeks or months, congratulations! You're on the road to responsible bird ownership.

Parakeets are the most popular companion bird in the United States, and one of the most popular pet birds in the world. Those of you who are new to pet birds are probably wondering just what a parakeet is and what all the fuss is about. Let's meet this little treasure.



Parakeet Basics

A parakeet is a long-tailed small parrot from Australia. He measures about seven inches long. In the wilds of Australia, this little bird is green. But breeders began developing different colors in the 1870s in Europe, and the parakeet is now available in a rainbow of colors, including yellow, blue, white, violet, and olive green.

Parakeets have been kept as pets for more than 160 years, since John Gould brought the first live birds to Britain from Australia. Some forty-five million parakeets are kept as pets around the world today, entertaining their owners with their active antics and their ability to learn tricks and to talk. Through the years, parakeets have performed in bird circuses, helped educate schoolchildren about basic pet care in classrooms, and brightened the lives of seniors and others in pet therapy programs.

Why Choose a Bird?

Before you decide to bring a parakeet into your life, you'll need to ask yourself a few questions. Do you like animals? Do you have time to care for one properly? Can you have pets where you live? Can you live with a little mess in your home

(seed hulls, feathers, and discarded food)? Can you tolerate, and appreciate, a little noise (the amount made by one exuberant parakeet) as part of your daily routine?

If you answered yes to all these questions, you're a good candidate for bird ownership. Your next question might be, "Why do I want a bird?" Here are some of the answers.

Birds are relatively quiet pets. Unless you have a particularly vocal macaw or cockatoo, most birds aren't likely to annoy the neighbors the way a barking dog can. In the case of parakeets, you'd need quite a large flock to disturb your neighbors because parakeets have quiet, chirpy little voices. In many rental leases, birds may not



Parakeets have chirpy little voices and won't make a racket.

The Parakeet at a Glance

Native land: Australia

Also known as: budgerigar, budgie, shell parrot, warbling grass parakeet, zebra parrot

Length: seven inches from the top of the head to the tip of the tail

Weight: thirty grams (1.06 ounces)

Life span: up to 18 years

Colors: Parakeets come in a wide variety of colors, including bright green (their native color), olive green, dark green, sky blue, cobalt, white, yellow, and violet. Other color varieties (known as mutations) include cinnamon, lutino (bright yellow feathers, clear red eyes, pale yellow beaks, and pale pink legs), white wing, lace wing (red eyes and lacy, light brown markings on the wings), yellow wing, opaline (less-prominent head striping, a V-shaped area on the back that is free of markings, and darker wing feathers), and spangle (wing feathers that are lighter in the center and darker on the edges).

even be considered pets because they are kept in a cage much of the time. This means you may be able to keep them without having to surrender a sizable security deposit to your landlord.

If you're a bird owner who rents an apartment or a house, you may be able to get your current landlord to write a letter of reference for your birds that you can use to show future landlords, explaining how responsible you are as a bird owner and how well-behaved your bird has been.

Birds' small size makes them good pets for today's smaller living spaces. More of us are living in apartments, mobile or manufactured homes, or condominiums, which makes it awkward and inconvenient to keep a large pet who needs a yard and lots of regular exercise. Birds just seem to fit better in apartments, condos, mobile homes, and other smaller living spaces.

Birds interact well with their owners. Although a bird isn't as blindly loyal as the average dog, he is far more interactive than a fish, a hamster, or even a guinea pig. As an added bonus, many birds can learn to whistle or talk, which is unique among pets and which many bird owners find amusing and entertaining.

Parrot Traits

The parakeet is a species of parrot, and all parrots have certain traits in common:

Four toes on each foot—two pointing backward and two pointing forward

The upper beak overhangs the lower beak

Broad head and short neck

Birds are long-lived pets. A cockatoo named King Tut greeted visitors at the San Diego Zoo for seventy years, and *Bird Talk* magazine reported on a 106-year-old Amazon parrot in Alaska. Many bird owners I know have made provisions for their larger parrots in their wills. Smaller birds can live long lives, too; the *Guinness Book of Records* reports an almost 30-year-old parakeet in Great Britain.

Birds require consistent, but not constant, attention. This can be a plus for today's busy single people

and families. While birds can't be ignored all day, they are content to entertain themselves for part of the day while their owners are busy elsewhere.

The needs and companionship of a bird provide a reason to get up in the morning. The value of this cannot be overestimated for older bird owners and single people who are on their own. Birds provide all the benefits of the human-animal bond, including lower blood pressure and reduced levels of stress.



Birds are smart, social animals, and they may surprise you with how affectionate they can be.

The Bottom Line

Keeping a companion bird is a big responsibility. Here are some things you need to think about as you become a parakeet owner.

- The cost of the bird himself
- The cost of his cage and accessories
- The cost of bird food (seeds, formulated diet, and fresh foods)
- The cost of toys
- The cost of veterinary care
- The amount of time you can devote to your bird each day
- How busy your life is already
- Who will care for the bird when you go on vacation or are away on business
- How many other pets you already own
- The size of your home

Finally, birds are intelligent pets. Whoever coined the phrase “birdbrain” didn’t appreciate how smart some birds are. On intelligence tests, some larger parrots have scored at levels comparable to chimpanzees, dolphins, and preschool-age children.

Parakeets and Children

If you plan to purchase a parakeet as a child’s pet, please keep the following in mind. Children in the primary grades need some help from their parents or from older siblings to care for their new pet. Children in the intermediate grades should be ready for the responsibility of bird ownership with parental supervision. Or the bird can just be a family pet, with each family member being responsible for some aspect of the bird’s care. Even the youngest family members can help out by selecting healthy foods for the bird on a trip to the market or picking out a safe, colorful toy at the bird store.

Parents need to remind children of the following when they're around birds:

- Approach the cage quietly. Birds don't like to be surprised.
- Talk softly to the bird. Don't scream or yell at him.
- Don't shake or hit the cage.
- Don't poke at the bird or his cage with your fingers, sticks, pencils, or any other items.
- If you're allowed to take the bird out of his cage, handle him gently.
- Don't take the bird outside. In unfamiliar surroundings, birds can become confused and fly away from their owners. Most are never recovered.
- Respect the bird's need for quiet time.

I'd like to remind adults to please not give a live pet as a holiday present. Birthdays, Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter, and other holidays are exciting but stressful times for both people and animals. A pet coming into a new home is under enough stress just by joining his new family; don't add to his stress by bringing him home for a holiday. Instead, give your child pet-care accessories for the actual celebration and a gift certificate that will allow the child to select his or her pet (with parental supervision, of course) after the excitement of the special day has died down.

Homing Parakeets

The noted British aviculturist the Duke of Bedford raised a large flock of parakeets on his country estates in Great Britain in the 1950s. The birds became known in avicultural circles for their homing abilities—talents more often associated with racing pigeons. The duke would let the birds loose to fly freely each morning, and they would return to their roosts in his aviaries by nightfall. He developed his flocks by selecting birds who showed even temperaments and weren't prone to flying off wildly when set free.